

Too Late for Tears by TheLostSister

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Joyce's perspective of Hop's memorial service.

Too Late for Tears

We arrived home from the memorial nearly an hour ago, and I couldn't help but head straight for the shower the moment we walked in the door. A portion of the day was spent outside, maybe only a half an hour at the most during the graveside portion of the service, but after just a few minutes under the beating sun, I could feel the sweat dripping down my bare legs. It was disgusting, but at least the heat gave my mind something else to focus on.

When I imagined what this day would look like in my head, I had pictured it overcast and maybe even raining. So when I woke up this morning to the sun already mercilessly shining through my blinds at 6:00 AM, it made me upset, and I felt irrationally betrayed by the weather. Hot, sunny summer days were meant to be carefree and happy. They certainly were not appropriate for what was bound to be one of the most difficult days of my entire life.

Although there was no reason for me to be awake at 6, I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep any longer so I climbed out of bed and turned on the morning news. The meteorologist predicted the high for the day to be 96.

Hopper would have totally hated it; extremely hot days always made him a bit irritable. Until today when they spoke of his time in Vietnam, I had never considered how that experience may have been why he despised the heat so much. That part of his life was something we never really talked about.

I suppose when I thought about it, there was a lot we never really talked about.

And now we never would.

The sweat wasn't all I needed to wash off in the shower though. It was barely even 7 PM, but I was completely exhausted, and selfishly, I just really needed to spend a few minutes alone to decompress from the day.

I would never, ever, blame El, but I spent a lot of today silently

worrying to a borderline point of obsession about how she was handling everything. Honestly, it's probably because that's easier than dealing my own emotions; it's definitely not her fault that I'm like this. If I could just busy myself taking care of someone else, then maybe I had a chance of making it through the day.

In fact, I know El tries so hard to make it so that I don't worry about her, we are very similar in that sense, but the whole idea of a memorial service was all new to her. I explained the basics of what to expect, but she'd spent the week leading up to it asking little questions that gave away her anxiety.

Did any other people know about her? How many people would be there? Was she going to have to get up and talk in front of them too? Was it inside a church? What happens if she cried? Who would she sit by? What was she supposed to wear? Was his body going to be there? That had been the hardest of them all to answer.

And then when she stayed in bed all morning until the last possible second, I wanted to make sure she understood that she had the choice of whether or not she even wanted to attend. Despite giving her the option and promising again and again that it was perfectly okay if she wasn't ready, I know something told her that she had to go, that it was what a normal child would do if they lost their parent. Though certainly nothing about her life had been normal up until now.

"Is this okay?" she had asked me with a soft, nervous edge when she stepped out of the bathroom in a dark colored dress that she borrowed from Nancy. Of course I had already told her that she could wear anything she would be comfortable in, that she didn't have to dress any particular way, but again, she didn't want to stand out; she was tired of being different.

This kid was such an incredibly strong little girl, but I also hoped she knew that I didn't expect her to be that way. I needed her to know that I was here for her no matter what, that *anything* she was feeling was normal, and that she could talk to me about whatever, whenever.

Promising her all of that also meant that I had to lead by example; it meant that I had to deal with my own grief in a somewhat healthy

manner too.

At the very least, I hoped that I was proficient at faking all that by now. I'd dealt with enough loss to know what was expected of me. Still, somehow today ended up being an even bigger challenge than I had been anticipating.

Oddly, what struck me the most wasn't seeing all the pictures of Jim displayed, or listening to others praise his accomplishments and talk about what they would miss about him; I'd done a fairly good job to prepping myself for all of that just like I had done for El.

What I had not prepared myself for was seeing Hopper's ex-wife.

Initially I was a little surprised to see that she'd made the trip over here, and even more surprised to not only watch her cry, but full on sob into her hands at one point during the service.

Diane had recognized me from the few times we'd met many years ago. I even hugged her and told her how sorry I was for her loss while El quietly stood by my side, Diane being none the wiser that this child was Hop's other little girl, the one who made the hole in his heart just a little bit smaller.

But underneath my pleasantries, there was a raging bit of something else that ripped a path through me.

It felt a lot like jealousy and...*anger*.

It was no secret to me that the loss of their child and their subsequent divorce hurt Jim in ways that he never talked about. But this woman who cried before me *chose* to hurt him when she ended their marriage, she *chose* to leave him to deal with the loss of their child all alone when he was already immensely struggling.

Diane was the one who *chose* to no longer have him in her life, so how could she sit here and sob over how he was gone.

But truly, I think what made me the angriest of all was the fact that I was no different.

I knew deep down that I *chose* to hurt him too.

Of course, what he and I had gone through wasn't the exactly same as the loss of their daughter and the ending of their marriage, but being secretly angry at her was a hell of a lot easier than having to face my own guilt.

There was plenty of that to go around, and it would haunt me single day, forever. A horrible part of me hoped that Diane felt that way too.

The memorial service itself had been beautiful; it felt like nearly the entire town of Hawkins was there. Maybe for the rest of the guests, remembering and celebrating what a hero Chief Jim Hopper was for saving the kids from 'the fire' helped with their grieving process, but it wasn't what I needed.

My grief, *carrying El's grief*, it was all so heavy, and honestly, I had expected that the memorial service would relieve at least a little bit of that for me. I'd gone through my fair share of them before, my grandparents, my parents, my boyfriend...and there had always been that little bit of closure that came with the final goodbye.

But unfortunately, today only left me feeling a lot like the day we 'buried' Will.

Except Hopper wasn't buried beneath the headstone that we all stood around and said goodbye to, the ashes of his body weren't spread somewhere beautiful...

He was simply *gone*.

Gone because *I* chose that.

On the drive home, I realized I'd built this day up in my head to be this big thing, as if I could just make it through this day, I could start to feel better.

But I don't.

I'm just...empty.

The water in the shower shifts from cool to cold, and I force myself to turn it off. Alone time was over for now, though I could always rest

assured that there would be a chance for more in the dead of night, every single night.

When I head out to the living room, El is sitting on the couch by herself, no doubt because the two boys chose to give her free reign of the television for the night. She's changed out of her dress and into a nightgown, and she's staring absently at the TV.

The look on her face is so familiar; she's emotionally and physically exhausted too. Being outside in the heat really takes it out of you without everything else she had to cope with today. I wonder if she was expecting to feel better after it was all over too.

Does she feel as empty as I do?

She flashes a soft, comforting smile in my direction when she sees me. I instantly know that as much as I have tried to prevent it, this sweet, empathetic girl is holding on to and carrying around my grief too, and I desperately want to take that weight from her.

I sit down next to her, and she moves closer, laying her head down in my lap.

"Oh honey," I instantly worry when I notice that her cheeks, forehead, and the tip of her nose are pink with sunburn, her sensitive skin not used to being outside for even just those 30 minutes that we spent this afternoon.

What sort of mother am I that I hadn't noticed this earlier?

I brush my fingertips across her cheek, and her skin is warm to the touch.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't even think to have you put any sunblock on."

"It's okay," she shrugs.

"Are you sure? I can run out to the store and pick up some aloe vera lotion."

She shakes her head no, and promises, "I'm okay."

Again, she doesn't want me to worry.

There's a fan gently blowing in the direction of the couch, but it's still pretty warm inside tonight. I brush her hair from her forehead and gather it off her neck.

The moment she put her head in my lap, I knew her guard was down, and I wish I could offer her a moment of peace for the rest of the night.

This child deserved it so much more than I did.

We sit in front of the TV together for a while. I couldn't tell you what's going in the show, and I don't think El could either. I absently run my fingers through her hair, and eventually she lets out a sleepy sigh. I glance down and see her blink heavily.

"Was that woman who was crying today Sara's momma?" she asks me quietly, even though it looks like she's fighting back sleep.

I honestly don't know how much Hopper had talked with her about his life before she joined him, but the blue hair band around El's wrist never came off, so it was clearly something that was very important to her just like it was to Hop. This meant that they must have talked about her, at least once.

I wonder if Diane had noticed it on El's wrist today; did she even recognize that it was her daughter's?

"Yes, that was her," I answer simply, not sure how much information El is looking for.

She's quiet for another moment, then asks, "Do you think he's with her now?"

"Sara?" I confirm, and she nods.

My brain, which has done its best to somehow protect me from the vast majority of feeling things for most of the day isn't prepared for this question, and it hits me like a ton of bricks. With all the talk about heaven and the other side that El heard, most of it probably for the first time, it really *shouldn't* have been a surprise that she would

have a question or two about it.

Honestly, I really don't even know what I believe in myself, especially when the only *other side* either of us have ever seen was someplace straight out of a nightmare.

But at the least, imagining Hop finally at peace with his other little girl was a comforting thought, so I manage to utter an honest, "I hope so."

I resume running my fingers through El's soft hair, if only to bring comfort to myself now.

"I'm glad she shared him with me. I mean, I know I wasn't his *real* daughter, but it's just—" El pauses, almost hesitant to finish her sentence. "I just wish he could have stayed with me for a little longer," she eventually admits.

It breaks my heart when I realize she was hesitant to say it out loud because she feels guilty for wishing for him to be here with her instead.

"El, you were his daughter just the same as Sara was," I promise because I know it's true. "Hopper loved you so much."

"But I am really happy that I get to stay with you," she adds, and I can tell she's trying so hard not to hurt my feelings.

"You don't have to explain, honey," I promise her softly again.

"I just wish he was here with us too," El clarifies anyway.

I think about how that could have been a real possibility; maybe there could have been an *us*, if only I hadn't been so stupid, so terrified to let myself get hurt again, when it was blatantly obvious that Hop had hoped for something more.

In the end, it was all just a useless form of self-preservation anyway. Having to live this life without him hurt more than anything else I could have ever imagined.

"Me too, baby. Me too," I tell her anyway.

Eventually El falls asleep, and I guess I do too because the next thing I know, Jonathan is standing in front of us, quietly telling me that I should get to bed because it's late. And it must be because he's turned the TV off and it's dark outside now.

"Thanks hon," I sigh.

"Do you want me to get her?" he asks, nodding down to El who's still curled up asleep on my lap.

"No, it's okay. I'll get her to bed."

I really don't know what I did to deserve my two boys. Taking El in was a major adjustment to their lives too, and I never heard one complaint. Both of the boys even offered to share a room with each other when I mentioned that it may be helpful for El to have a little space of her own for a while. That is, at least until we figure out a long term plan. And I guess now that the memorial service is over, that was something I needed to start thinking about a little more seriously.

The kids have handled all of the abrupt changes extremely well, but I fear they may not react with such positivity to what's been in the back of my mind, but that's nothing for me to worry about tonight.

I gently shake El's shoulder, and she wakes up with a sleepy sigh.

"Time for bed," I say, and she nods and stands up without a word.

I lead her down to Will's bedroom, which is mostly her bedroom now, and help her into bed.

There's one of Hop's shirts hidden under her pillow that she pulls out and gathers in her arms to use as a pillow. He should be here now tucking her into bed, not me.

Regardless, I pull her blanket up around her and kiss her forehead with a quiet, "Goodnight."

Even though it's hot at night, I've noticed that she always sleeps under the covers, no doubt it's a comfort thing.

“Goodnight,” El murmurs sleepily.

Her eyes close almost the second she gets settled in, and I’m so thankful that sleep comes easy for her tonight. Over the few weeks we’ve spent together, I’ve caught her awake at all hours of the night and early morning, and so I know that’s not always the case. I don’t know if those sleeping habits are normal for her or if it’s something she’s recently developed, but I refrain from questioning her. Of course I would if it became detrimental to her, but she always seems to seek out my company if she really needs me, so I try to let her guide when and how conversations like that happen.

I turn on the small fan that sits on the desk near her window and leave her to sleep. I make my way through the house, turning the rest of the lights off and double check that the front door is locked, before climbing into my own empty bed.

I’ve silently cried myself to sleep more times than I can count, but tonight, nothing comes.

There’s just an overwhelming, dark sense of *nothing*.